

NPA 6, February 7, 2019

Greek Orthodox Church, 600 So. Willard St., Burlington, VT

Steering Committee Present: Mary Riley, Michelle Mraz, Charles Simpson

32 people attending, including the participants, this despite icy roads and sidewalks.

Meeting called to order at 7:05pm

### **1. South District Candidates' Forum:**

Joan Shannon: I've been district councilor and prior to that Ward 5 councilor for several years. My approach is to listen to all sides before I make a decision. I've moved many issues into law which were brought forward to me by my constituents. One example was a ban on smoking in public facilities. This was approved and later enacted state-wide. We then extended it to the outside areas on the Market Place.

Another issue is zoning to allow offices in the Enterprise Zone as well as cafés and dance studios. These legal changes happened because you brought the issues to me. Preservation of natural areas was another issue. It is also a social justice issue because such areas in the city are accessible to all. Changing the zoning to allow City Market without negatively impacting neighbors is another example. It has some impact but this was minimized. We need to fight climate change by making Burlington a walkable, bike-able community. My only priority is to serve you in the South District and make Burlington the best city it can be.

Paco DeFrancis: I'm running to improve the business climate and want to lower property taxes by 5 cents on the municipal side of the budget. I've lived and gone to school in other parts of New England so have a wider perspective. I'm a former ski racer and chased the dream. I moved here to work at Keurig Green Mountain. And I've seen a trend of divestment weakening the business climate. Green Mountain shifted its headquarters from So. Burlington to Mass. because that state was more supportive. I understand the connection Vermont has with Quebec trade. I understand the importance of business connections across the country if we are to grow good, high paying jobs. We also need to make this area more affordable and attractive to college graduates from here and elsewhere. This means we need a more vibrant economy. I plan to do this by improving the quality of life, such as with bike lanes, including on St. Paul St. and Shelburne Rd., even at the cost of street parking. We have protectionist zoning. I want to allow housing in the Enterprise District so that an increase in supply would reduce the cost of housing overall.

Mohamed Jafar: I was born in Kenya in a refugee camp but grew up here. My parents fled civil strife in Somalia. There's ten younger siblings in my family. Vermont is different but I'm figuring it out. I went to a N.H. private college after public school here in Burlington. The issue I think we could address more aggressively is homelessness. Affordable housing is of first importance. We have people sleeping in the woods here. This city has the resources to mitigate this but we have people sleeping on Church St. The opioid epidemic is another thing. Our nonprofit housing organizations are doing good work but they need more support. We need to recalculate our priorities. I want to address the homeless and invest more in our housing trust. We can bring together the

organizations that already exist. We also need to bridge the New American communities into the larger city so all our residents contribute and are heard.

Audience questions/comments: 1) I'm a write-in candidate, Joe Lafleur. I see the present candidates all agreeing that things are generally fine but need marginal improvements. Things are much worse, for example climate change and with the lack of access to quality food, so we need truly radical reform. To quote David Foster Wallace, "Never in history has a country so well off been so miserable because we resist raising taxes to feed and shelter poor people, not for their sake but for ours" (loose paraphrase). I see silence by a 96 percent white population that doesn't address these needs. We need radical change here. 2) Where do you stand on the ballot item on the downtown improvement district (DID)? Answer: P. DeF. I support it as an aid to put Burlington on the map in the way we initially created the Church St. Marketplace. Expansion of it would add to growth, make the downtown cleaner and more welcoming. M.J.: I support it on the condition that it doesn't marginalize or overlook the needs of the homeless. Rather than prioritize development, however, we should prioritize the homeless. This business district is for a limited group of people. I want public amenities for residents. J.S.: I support it as a way to bring in private money. The city remains responsible for the streets and sidewalks but private money will add enhancements. An example is the problems with the mentally ill on Church St. Merchants funded a compassionate approach making an effort to help them through social workers. It helps businesses pool their money and engage in public works projects. The DID will upgrade the service level. City Council will have to approve each of these enrichments, and residents will be part of that. 3) What would you do to bring stronger linkages on to New Americans? MJ.: As soon as I got back here from college, I joined the board for AALV which helps new Americans and which set up a forum with Bernie Sanders to introduce them our legislators. (Note: AALV was originally "African Americans Living in Vermont" but became more inclusive and modified its name to AALV.) This brought more people out to vote. We need simpler and more accessible ballots. We are working with the Sec. of State to use technology to translate ballots. We've introduced new Americans to our existing city councils and conveyed their cultures to councilors. English isn't a prerequisite to be an engineer but without it there is a barrier to political participation. We need a bridge and a connection and representation in office is one way to do this, on both city council and school boards. Paco DeF.: It is extremely important the work Mohamed is doing to expand our democracy. If you look at the demographics, the percentage of non-new Americans is shrinking. We need to make sure they have the resources to succeed. I propose a \$3000 revolving, zero interest loan program helping them buy a car or start a business or for housing. I would fund it by selling the city-owned lot on the corner of So. Winooski and Main St. We need more investment in higher education. We are now at the bottom in terms of state support. We need to pick up the slack where the state isn't doing enough, working with area colleges and tech schools to offer night classes and associate degrees. The new Americans really need this. JS.: This question is at the heart of how I try to work on city council. We agree on the problems but to solve them you have to look at the opportunities. I've found some. I reached out to Mohamed and had coffee with him and he told me that his parents were reluctant to go to public meetings. So we had a meeting just for new Americans. I wanted this to be their opportunity to meet with councilors, the mayor, school board

members, and city commissioners. It was a wonderful meeting leading to many ideas. We will be doing more of this in the future. I have many good friends who are new Americans and I helped some of them create an Ethiopian restaurant. They needed an entrée to get them into business. We continue to work together. They give me insight into how they view the world. I recruited the first new American on council some years ago. We have livable wage job and housing challenges. It is important to maintain such jobs and to attract companies like Dealer.com and that we have affordable housing as we will at City Place, which is one piece of the puzzle. But it isn't enough.

**2. School Board,** Jeff Wick (J.W.) and Clare Wool (C.W.): J.W.: I'm vice chair of the board, C.W. is chair. The biggest news is the school budget. In Jan. the board approved a budget for the next fiscal year and it will be on the March ballot. We think it strikes a balance and also addresses needs that have gone unmet. In a nutshell, our current budget is \$85 million. We built on that with \$2.2 mil. for debt service and increased services. The new budget is \$87.2 mil., which includes some \$1.8 mil. of new additions or a 4.3% increase over last budget. The state formula for education budgets is complex and still has variables unknown. We anticipate the tax impact for those without a state payment will go up 4.8%, as estimated. A year ago it was thought that the budget would go up 7.99% but it actually went up only 3.4%. The state component is unpredictable. We hope for a positive surprise. We anticipate a 4.4% increase in what is 80% of the overall city property tax. The board believes in direct instruction using well-trained instructors. We are also social service providers. We want to be prudent stewards. In the past we cut all the para-educators in kindergarten classrooms. We are starting to put them back. C.W.: We categorize the needs by working with staff. Our staff/student ratio is 1 to 10 in pre-K and 1 to 22 in kindergarten. This is a big change. We listened and so are returning the para-educators here. We are doing some thing similar in the high school. We keep direct instruction in mind as we make these changes. We are looking closely at the achievement gaps in the early years. We'll post the budget on-line. J.W.: I'm proud of Burlington's school district and our education. Q. The bulk of the budget comes from property taxes but the state hasn't been uniform in their approach to this. What's your suggestion on shoring up the education fund without raising the property taxes? J.W.: I think the governor and legislators agree that tax stability is good and modest increases should be at or below inflation. We have a lot of housing units coming on line soon and in this we are different from the rest of the state. We don't need contraction in the budget. C.W.: Act 46 is reducing the number of school districts in the state. We need to address this large number of districts and I'm grateful Montpelier is addressing this. This doesn't affect Burlington.

**3. Mayor Weinberger's presentation on ballot items:** I appreciate you working me into the schedule. The ballot items are important. Question #1 is the school budget and I'll be voting yes. They have a challenging job and they made some tough choices. I have one child and the schools and a second one soon. Question #2 asks for an increase in the general municipal operations budget. It is 1.5% in the total municipal budget. In the 8 years of my tenure, the increases will be below inflation for this period. Yet we have also found savings and added services and kept increases low. It is not about some dramatic expansion of services. But there comes a time, even with efficiencies, when you have to cut services or have a modest tax increase. 10 of 12 councilors voted yes on this. Question #3 is about permit reform in our permitting

system. This is a significant change which allows all the functions in three departments to be combined in one permit center overseen by an appointed head confirmed by council. Question #4, is about the downtown improvement district. This gives it a nonprofit board with more authority. We have thrived through having the Marketplace, which actively manages Church St. This will expand its size to the entire downtown, overseen by a non-profit board, no longer by a city department. I see this as a better way to perform these functions. There remains strong oversight by council including budget authority. There are also sunset provisions. The founders of the Market Place support this. Question #5 is not about personal property but addresses non-real estate property owned by businesses. It is presently a disincentive to business and applied to things such as office equipment owned by businesses. It generates a million a year in taxes. It would step down gradually over 8 years. What we have now hurts investment in Burlington and the change will have very little impact on existing taxpayers. Q. Whose on the nonprofit board? A. They are appointed by council, fee payers, and social service providers and others. Any residential property will be netted out of the assessment, which will apply just on the commercial portion of a mixed use building. There will be residents on the board. Q. Will this privatize the public space of Church St.? A. Some say this, but the council doesn't see it this way. No public asset is transferred and no public authority is being transferred. The board will beautify and market the DID. There are 1000 of them nationwide and they are seen as useful tools. Ours is different in that we will be retaining more public oversight than other DIDs. J. S.: That's the crux of whether people will vote yes or no. We have done all we can to avoid privatization. The Council approves the management plan and the businesses essentially are taxing themselves. They want better transit, beautification, connections to the waterfront, and safety and support services for the most vulnerable. And parking. The city still has to provide what we currently provide.

**4. Public Comment:** Q. On the charter change. I'm against it. It is not well thought out. It is an effort to privatize our downtown. The mall is private space. They tell businesses when to open and close, they have the security, they can eject you irrespective of the law. Across the country in DIDs, rents go up, locally owned businesses are pushed out, and decision making in this case will be made by a majority of business board members. It is a 501(c)6, which is a business trade association operated for the interests of the business owners. The choice isn't, do we make our downtown more competitive by expanding it?. There are other ways to accomplish this with more extensive marketing. Why not simply enlarge the district and keep the existing board and so end the free-rider problem of off-districts benefitting without paying? Q. University Mall is entirely private property. So it is not like our Church St marketplace. I'll ask the mayor, what will the tax rate increase be given unfunded pension liabilities? What portion of the tax increase is to address pension obligations? A. Weinberger: None of it. In the past we addressed this and kept the taxpayer portion flat at \$9 million a year. Employers pay a higher amount for these pension payments. Q. On the DID, I'm coming from Manhattan. It has 25 neighborhood alliances and they are essential. The downtown is growing and we need this type of organization to lead rather than simply maintain things. All of them are 501(c)6's and they work.

**5. Panel on ranked choice voting** (also known as instant runoff or IRV): Chris Pearson (C.P.), Sandy Baird (S.B.), Kurt Wright (K.W.), Robert Backus (R.B.). Moderator: IRV

inspires strong opinions. We had it in 2006 for a short time and was then it was voted out. N.H. is proposing to use it in the presidential primary. Maine uses it, Mass, Conn, and Wyoming are considering it. C.P.: I support it and the Senate is considering introducing a bill. Maine's was brought about by referendum. The concept is you rank your candidates on the ballot. With first past the post, what we have now, with 3 or 4 candidates, the winner can have less than the majority or with 2 candidates on same political side, they could split the majority opinion and let the less popular opinion actually win. First past the post disadvantages minority parties. We propose that a winner has to have 1 more vote than 50% of all votes. Without this using IRV, you eliminate the candidate who came in last add their second choice to the totals of the top two vote getters. If there's 4 candidates, you do the same for the third vote getter. IRV has been upheld in federal courts and is the choice of the political science associations. S.B.: Burlington had an IRV system and it was instantly repealed. I campaigned against it. It is not a real runoff. Our system isn't broken. Without anyone getting 40%, you have a real runoff between the top two. When we had it, the winner got only 29% of the first-place votes. This encourages people not to vote. I didn't participate in the runoff because I bullet voted (voted just for one candidate). People don't understand the system of IRV or try to game it. R.B. I'm for it. I was on the council. When it was repealed there was still some support. It creates an opportunity for many voices to be heard. It promotes democracy and open conversation. On the first ballot, Wright had the most votes, Kiss second. If you voted for Montroll, you didn't have to worry that in voting for him you were electing Bob Kiss. This created a dialogue. It promotes third party candidates. We have three parties in the city and we know that we all have to work across the board. K.W.: Now, what has that produced? Would we have had Lincoln, or Kennedy or Sanders? We don't know. The present system worked well and let a candidate to galvanize support and win with less than 50%, a candidate like Sanders. Did it do away with a negative campaigns?. Actually it created a vanilla, homogenous campaign. Let the voters sort it out if we have candidates taking strong positions. Did it create more voter turn out? That election had lower turnout than the two prior elections. In a real run off, there would be more information provided and no chance for strategic voting. We can't assume the results would be the same as in a real runoff. People that did come out against IRV were the people who wanted to give the system the boot. It has been repealed in other places as well. There is no perfect voting system. But the negatives of IRV outweigh the positives. Q. Have there been studies that compare the two to see if they achieve the same results? A. C.P.: No, you either have one or the other. In Maine, the Republican came in first, the Democrat narrowly second. The third party vote for second place went to the Dem. and so he won. The conventional system would have elected the Republican. K.W.: Those other places mentioned had IRV bills proposed, but that doesn't mean they will be enacted. Q. It is interesting but difficult to explain and needs to be simplified. C.P.: It lends itself to visuals. Q. Minnesota Public Radio has a program that explains it well. I can't understand how people find it difficult to understand. Choosing ice cream flavors is an excellent comparison. Q. I was Sandy's student and found her very passionate and clear on this issue. But in Maine, how was it received? I know people there who were unhappy. C.P.: The exit polling found most folks said they enjoyed the process. S.B.: Politicians aren't like ice cream; elections

are about real issues. In the IRV election here the candidates also sought second place votes. I like third parties. Why don't we say the winner is the one who gets a plurality? Q. Joan S. I support IRV. But I appreciate that residents don't have confidence in it. Is there a third system? Are you willing to look at other voting systems? A. K.W.: There's no perfect system. I'd consider it if someone showed it to me, one that is simpler and has better results. I'm not saying I would have won without IRV. IRV failed because the candidate who got the most first and second place votes altogether was not the candidate who won. This was prior to the Burlington Telecom scandal being revealed. C. P.: There were very few spoiled ballots in that election so this suggests few voters were confused. But we have low turnout now. Look at the principals involved. Shouldn't we have a 50% plus one rule that gives us integrity? We have a 40% minimum threshold which seems odd. There are many systems better than a plurality system. Q. I think it is an important topic and support anything other than what we have now, with the winner getting only 41% of the vote. We need a system that measures the intensity of support. And measures the intensity of opposition. Sticky dots might better measure this intensity factor. Q. If it comes to a runoff, you know the candidates. But IRV does eliminate the cost of a runoff. A. S.B.: I don't see what's wrong with the current system. It might be broken at the state or federal level, not in the city. We've never had a mayoral runoff, so the cost factor is moot. I say keep the 40% threshold. Why not just a plurality? A. R.B.: We have a 40% margin so that's why we haven't had a run off. But with 50%, we'd have had to have run offs, such as with the Peter Clavelle victory. Alabama treats the general election as a primary and the top two then run against each other, but that's not appealing. You can't have multiple runoffs. IRV gives third party candidates a chance. Q. I think our system is broken and IRV won't fix it because so few people vote. The tragedy is that we have 18% turnout. The current mayor got 18% of registered voters. Our system is totally broken. A. R.B.: And only some of the theoretically eligible voters actually register, so the vote percent is actually lower. K.W.: We need candidates that inspire the voters.

**Meeting adjourned, 9:10**

Respectfully submitted, Charles Simpson